

**Testimony before the
Montana House Judiciary Committee
in favor of HB 370**

**Submitted by: RON KEINE
February 14, 2013**

My name is Ron Keine. Thank you for the chance to speak to you today. I'm here today to tell you why I don't trust our government. I think you'll agree that I have a very good reason.

In 1974, I was arrested with four of my friends. We were tried for kidnapping and murder and sentenced to death for a crime we had nothing to do with. A year later, my hometown newspaper, the Detroit News, uncovered an intricate campaign by the police and prosecutors to coerced, false testimony out of a hotel maid. They made promises and threatened her into testifying that we had raped her and made her watch while we killed a college student named William Velten. She came clean to the newspaper, but the court refused to re-open our case, even though she had been the only witness and the only "evidence" against us.

Nine days before I was supposed to go to the gas chamber, the real murderer, a law enforcement officer, experienced an epiphany, walked into a church, and confessed to the murder. The minister convinced him to go to the police, where he laid out the entire crime in intricate detail, including a hand-drawn map of where the body was and details that only the murderer could know.

The judge agreed to hold a hearing and delayed my execution, but the County Attorney maintained that the real murderer's story was not believable, and no charges were filed against him at that time. When the hearing finally happened, the judge threw out my case, and we were freed, with nothing but a pair of flip-flops and an orange jump suit with "Death Row" on the back.

I was homeless. Stayed in abandoned cars, ate out of dumpsters and barely survived. I finally found work because I started my own business. Years later, I became the chairman of my local Republican Party and co-chaired a tax-payer's association with a membership of over 10,000. Even though I was exonerated more than 25 years ago, my family and I are still victimized by what happened to me. Some people from my hometown still don't know me as "the guy who was exonerated". They know me as "the guy who was involved in that rape and murder out west". Imagine your family hearing that. Imagine your mother hearing "Rapist. Murderer" yelled at her at church.

My case is not unique. There are 141 other men and women who have been exonerated of their crimes after spending time on death row. Only 18 of them had DNA evidence to help free them. I, like most of the death row survivors, was not saved by the "system". A newspaper, a hotel maid, a minister, and a murderer who found God are what saved me from the gas chamber.

It could happen here in Montana. And it will. You keep the death penalty, and someone will fall through the cracks. The crime lab will get something wrong, on purpose or not. A witness will be coerced. New forensics will be discovered. It's only a matter of time.

It could happen to anybody – your son, your nephew, your uncle, or even your daughter. And what if the newspaper, a hotel maid, a minister, or the real killer isn't there to save them? Do you trust the government, the "system", which we all know is corrupt and broken? I know I don't. I bet you'd trust the crime lab, right? But looked what happened I don't trust them with my health care, my tax dollars, my guns, and I sure as hell don't trust them with my life.

Some say that we should keep the death penalty for those cases that we are absolutely positive of guilt. 142 of us were tried, convicted, and sent to death row beyond any reasonable doubt. They were absolutely positive we were guilty.